

1988 too soon for polls: top official

Reforms not in line with Basic Law 'will go in 1997'

A HIGH-RANKING Chinese official said yesterday that introducing direct elections in Hongkong next year would be a bit hasty.

The Secretary-General of the Hong Kong and Macau Office at the State Council, Mr Lu Ping, also warned that, no matter what the coming White Paper on political reform says, any measure not in line with the Basic Law — the post-1997 constitution — will be overturned in 1997.

Mr Lu, a member of the Basic Law Drafting Committee, is the most senior Chinese official to speak out publicly on the issue of direct elections.

He said public opinion should be listened to closely before any decision is made on direct elections — next year or after China's takeover in 1997.

Asked about reports that Beijing told London not to introduce direct elections next year, he said: "This statement I will neither confirm nor deny — no comment."

But he said reports that China already intended to set up

by

Yau Shing-mu in Kunming

the first post-1997 Special Administrative Region Government without direct elections were wrong.

Mr Lu acknowledged that overturning political reforms that did not square with the Basic Law would shake Hongkong's stability, "But that's the only way. No other alternative."

Speaking to Hongkong reporters in Kunming — where the drafting committee's subgroup on the post-1997 political system begins a working session today — Mr Lu said public opinion would be one of the most important factors governing the direct elections decision.

"There's a silent majority in Hongkong. According to a recent survey, a lot of people are disinterested.

"The issue will be better solved if Hongkong people have a uniform view."

The Hongkong Government will publish its White Paper on political reform at the end of the year.

Mr Lu said it would be better for reforms to run in accordance with the timetable of the Basic Law drafting.

That would give the people more time to deliberate and discuss.

The first draft of the post-1997 constitution will be released about the middle of next year.

Public comments will be submitted to the standing committee of the National People's Congress late next year.

The sub-group will discuss three less controversial topics first at its working session starting this morning.

The 13 members — who arrived in Kunming, capital of Yunnan, yesterday — will focus on the regional organisation, such as Urban and Regional councils, Heung Yee Kuk and District Boards, the civil service and the judiciary.

"Earlier we agreed that a working guideline that the easier comes first," a co-convenor, Mr Xiao Weiyun, said.

If there is time after these topics have been dealt with, other topics may come up.

Another co-convenor, Mr Louis Cha, said he ex-

• Turn to Page 18, Col 9

• See editorial, Page 6

1988 'too soon' for polls

• From Page One

pected that discussions on the establishment of a final court of appeal would be more time-consuming.

"As far as the legislature and the chief executive are concerned, people's views are too various and divided so it's better to leave it aside first," Mr Cha said.

Mr Cha said arrangements for the first SAR government had not been discussed yet, "because it is a big problem".

In Hongkong, Executive and Legislative Councillors will hold an in-house meeting at the end of this month to discuss the 1987 political reform.

They will focus their discussions on a report which has just been compiled by the 23-member Omelco Constitutional Affairs Panel.

If endorsement is given by the full Omelco on the February 27 meeting, the report will be submitted to the Government.

Panel convenor Chen Shou-lum made the announcement yesterday after the group held a meeting to finalise the report, which will weigh heavily in the political review.

Mr Chen yesterday refused to discuss the contents of the confidential report before it was endorsed by Omelco.

But sources told *The Standard* that a chapter on direct elections to Legco — summarising the views of the public and the panel — has been added to the six chapters already known to be in the report.

It was learnt that the chapter is just a summary of views, and reaches no conclusion on whether direct elections should be introduced in 1988.